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WILLIAM TINDALE

THE MAKER OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

BY J. H. GARDINER

IN this centenary of the English Bible it would be wrong if no attempt were made to draw some attention to William Tindale, the scholar, apostle, and martyr, who began the translation, and who gave to the book for all time the characteristics which make it what it is. He is known by name even to few persons to-day; yet by high character, by devotion to the truth, by undaunted courage through exile and persecution, he earned a place beside the great reformers and apostles. In the general history of the Reformation he has been overshadowed by Luther; in England he was obscured by the lawless selfishness of Henry VIII., and by the picturesque figures of Cardinal Wolsey, Sir Thomas More, and Thomas Cromwell. But even on the historical side his part in the English Reformation has been underestimated. In the intervals of his work on the translation he sent forth three controversial works which had a capital part in strengthening the religious ferment in England and the discontent with the corruptions and oppressions of the old Church. Sir Thomas More, in his semi-official defense of the Church of Rome, singled him out for refutation, and coupled him with Luther. Cromwell took long chances of Henry's displeasure in his efforts to draw Tindale back to England; and after Henry's break with the Pope, Tindale was still so leading a figure that some unknown members of the old Church sent a special emissary to Antwerp to betray him into the hands of the authorities there. That he is given so few pages in the histories of the times seems in part due to the pre-occupation of historians with political issues, in part to Tindale's own retiring personality.

When William Tindale was coming to maturity—he was

born probably about 1495—England seemed to be entering on a new and golden age, in which misery and ignorance should disappear. The evil times of the Wars of the Roses were slipping from men's minds, and there was a new king, young and joyous, and in full sympathy with the full tide of enlightenment that was just reaching England. John Colet, the great Dean of St. Paul's, of whom J. R. Green declares in his *History of the English People*, "the awakening of a rational Christianity, whether in England or in the Teutonic world at large, began with the Italian studies of John Colet," had been sweeping away the cobwebs of the medieval theology by the declaration that there are no mysteries in the Scriptures which cannot be understood by a devout layman. Erasmus, taking the word from Colet, proclaimed that "the true Christian's religion, instead of consisting in the acceptance of scholastic dogmas or the performance of outward rites and ceremonies, really consists in a true, self-sacrificing loyalty to Christ, his ever-living Prince." Yet in spite of them and of these obvious truths, the English Reformation was not destined to run smoothly to its end through a quiet and spiritual making over of the Church from within and above.

When Tindale was at the universities, however—he took his B.A. at Oxford in 1512, and his M.A. in 1515, and afterward studied at Cambridge—no shadow had fallen on the bright hopes for a purified religion in a new world. Yet if the shadow had not fallen, it was imminent. At the time that Erasmus, the wit, the scholar, the petted man of letters, declared in the preface to his edition of the Greek New Testament of 1517 his wish that the Scriptures might be translated into all languages of all peoples, the authorities of the English Church were whipping and fining weavers and farmers and small tradespeople for reading in stealth fragments of the Scriptures in Wiclif's translation. In 1517, too, Luther nailed his ninety-five theses against the abuse of indulgences to the door of the church at Wittenberg, and his doctrines and tracts soon spread to England. Then in the rough stress of the conflict Erasmus, and even Sir Thomas More, shrank back into acquiescence with the open worldliness of the Roman Church rather than take the chances of the revolution that was sure to follow the opening of the people's eyes. The enthusiasm for the new ideas cooled even more quickly when it reached the cloisters of the rich

monasteries and the palaces of the bishops. To the great mass of churchmen, engrossed with the temporalities of their offices, or like Wolsey occupied with affairs of state, or enmeshed in the subtleties of the scholastic theology, the teachings of Colet, which were echoed by Erasmus and put into living practice by Tindale, were both iconoclastic and sacrilegious. Their resistance to the spread of the new theology had substantial grounds, for on the subtle and intricate interpretations of the Scriptures rested the Church's hold on men's souls. And by the completion of an evil cycle the hold of the Church on the purses of the laity was linked with the scholastic theology; for if the priests alone could understand the doctrines necessary for salvation, they only could know what was sin and how it could be atoned for.

The times were ripe for some one to rouse England from its slothful content with such a state of affairs. Luther's voice had stirred all northern Europe, and his pamphlets, translated and secretly imported into England, were fanning into flame the smouldering sparks of the old Wiclif movement that the Church had never quite stamped out. In England no one man, as in Germany, was to carry through the Reformation; but William Tindale was to make it inevitable by giving the people the Scriptures in their own tongue, and by helping to make Englishmen see how far the Church had drifted away from the truths therein taught.

When Tindale emerged into the world from his studies at the two universities, he became tutor and chaplain in the family of a Sir John Walsh, in his native country of Gloucestershire. The Church in this part of England was rich and conservative, and Foxe's account of Tindale in the *Book of Martyrs* shows how little welcome were the ideas which Colet and Erasmus had sowed among their fellow-clergy. It was here that Tindale, in the story told by Foxe, after a heated discussion with a neighboring priest, blurted out the purpose of his life:

"Communing and disputing with a certain learned man in whose company he happened to be, he drove him to that issue that the learned man said, 'We were better be without God's laws than the Pope's.' Master Tindale, hearing that, answered him, 'I defy the Pope and all his laws'; and said, 'If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest.'"

To effect this purpose, from which he never after wavered,

Tindale in 1522 or 1523 went up to London to find a patron, with a translation of an oration of Isocrates as proof of his scholarship in Greek, and a letter from his patron to Sir Henry Guilford, the Controller of the King's household. It was an inauspicious time, however; in Germany the Reformation under Luther's lead was in full torrent, and Henry VIII., proud of his scholarship and confident in his orthodoxy, had published the answer to Luther which in 1521 had won him his title of Defender of the Faith. It was not until about 1525 that under the charms of Anne Boleyn he began to have scruples as to whether orthodoxy included obedience to the Pope. Wolsey was at the height of his luxury and arrogance; and the recrudescence of the Lollard movement was already seriously disturbing the high officers of the Church. Tindale had hoped for the patronage of Tunstal, Bishop of London, a friend of More's, and intellectually a sympathizer with the New Learning; but the temporalities of his see occupied Tunstal's mind, and he was probably shrewd enough to recognize that a translation of the New Testament into the tongue of the people might have large and unsettling results.

Accordingly Tindale, as he himself tells us, soon understood not only that "there was no room in my Lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all England." He lingered in London, however, for two years, working diligently at his books. Humphrey Monmouth, a wealthy cloth merchant, who a little later was suspected of favoring the Lutheran movement, in his defense gave an account of his intercourse with Tindale:

"The priest came to me again and besought me to help him; and so I took him into my house half a year; and there he lived like a good priest as methought. He studied most part of the day and of the night at his book; and he would not eat but sodden meat by his good-will, and drink but small single beer. I never saw him wear linen (in those days a sign of luxury) about him in the space he was with me."

In all that Monmouth says of Tindale there is an evident note of affection and respect.

In 1524 Tindale, seeing that there was no hope in England, went into exile and poverty on the Continent, and there accomplished his great work. Most of the time his movements are lost; but it is almost certain that he went first to visit Luther at Wittenberg; and it is not improbable

that he there completed his translation. Of the printing we have more certain information, thanks to the enemy who did his best to prevent it. Tindale had gone to Cologne, which had good printers, though it was bitterly opposed to the Reformation, and there in great secrecy began the printing. John Cochläus, a fierce persecutor of the reformers, who tells the story, nosed him out, and got an interdict from the Senate of Cologne against the further printing. Tindale was able to escape up the Rhine to Worms, and to take with him the sheets as far as they had been printed. Thus the printing of the English New Testament began in secret and in peril.

At Worms, which was a Protestant stronghold, two editions of the New Testament, a quarto and an octavo, each of three thousand copies, were struck off. This New Testament was the first ever translated into English from the original Greek, for Wiclif had used the Vulgate; and it is the first translation into modern English, for Wiclif's language is that of the age of Chaucer. All copies of these editions have disappeared, except for a fragment of the quarto containing part of the Gospel of St. Matthew, and one copy of the octavo complete except for the title-page, and another more seriously mutilated. The style of this first translation fixed the style of the English Bible for all time. The books were smuggled into England, some of them it is said in bales of hemp, and there were received with eager delight by the reformers, and with fierce denunciation by the Church. The bishops bought up and burned as many copies as they could, but the presses on the Continent soon swamped this form of repression, and the New Testament only spread the faster.

For the next few years we know nothing of Tindale, except that for part of the time, at any rate, he was living in the quiet university town of Marburg. It was during this period that he finished his translation of the Pentateuch, and wrote the three controversial tracts which helped so powerfully to swell the stream of Protestant feeling in England. The first of these pamphlets, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, which appeared in 1528, is a careful and sober statement of the doctrine of justification by faith. This doctrine, which was a corner-stone of the Reformation, cut at the roots of the control of laymen by the priests. The Roman Church taught that salvation comes through a de-

vout acceptance and performance of the sacraments, rites, and ceremonies of the Church, and that atonement for sin and remission of its penalties come through the deeds of expiation, whether by prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, or the payment of money which should be prescribed by the priest at confession. The doctrine of justification by faith swept away all such intermediaries between man and God, and taught that salvation comes through faith by the free gift of God. No heresy was more fiercely reprobated by the old Church than this; and Tindale's work was immediately denounced by the English bishops, and a list of twenty-nine distinct heretical propositions contained in it was held up for the warning of true sons of the Church.

The title of Tindale's next work, which was probably also published in 1528, *The Obedience of a Christian Man and How Christian Rulers Ought to Govern, Wherein also if thou mark diligently thou shalt find eyes to perceive the crafty conveyance of jugglers*, shows clearly the motive which led Tindale to spend so much time and energy on these tracts. The work is in the main a bold and vigorous denunciation of the intrusion of churchmen into affairs of the world. Tindale speaks of Rome as anti-Christ, and he exposes the greed and the worldliness of the clergy of his day with a vividness and directness which must have brought examples swarming to the mind of every reader. The style shows Tindale's gift of grim irony and terse phrasing at its best. The importance of the tract in its own day is shown by the fact that Foxe mentions several cases in which Protestants of the time carried it with them when they made their public profession of faith before the authorities.

Two years later Tindale followed this work with another which was even bitterer in terms, and which unluckily was based on twisted reports of what had been happening in England. In *The Practice of Prelates* he ascribed the moves for Henry's divorce from Catherine to the unscrupulous and treacherous intrigues of the bishops. Against Wolsey—"Wolf-see," as he called him in the punning fashion of the day—his indignation waxed hot; and he took high moral grounds on the unrighteousness of the divorce. He was too direct and single-minded to be a good politician in those days of brutal despotism on the one side and cringing subservience on the other.

In the mean time he had been drawn into a controversy

with Sir Thomas More. The latter, at the request of his friend Tunstal, the same Bishop of London who had received so coldly Tindale's petition for patronage in the translation of the Bible, had taken up the cause of the Church, and had sent forth a *Dialogue of Sir Thomas More, Knight, . . . wherein be treated divers matters, as of the veneration and worship of images and relics, praying to saints, and going on pilgrimage, with many other things touching the pestilent sect of Luther and Tindale, by the tone begun in Saxony, and by the tother labored to be brought into England. Made in the Year of our Lord 1528.* It will be noted that this title testifies to the fact that a man so well acquainted with the times as was More put Tindale on a level with Luther in the forwarding of the Reformation. To this *Dialogue* Tindale wrote an *Answer*; and to this More rejoined with a *Confutation* in five hundred dreary folio pages of theological subtleties varied by coarse abuse. In those days religious controversy felt few scruples about charity or restraint of language; but in this case it is Tindale rather than More who shines for moderation and sincerity of tone.

In his next work on the Bible Tindale turned to the Old Testament, and in 1530 he published a translation of the Pentateuch. Where or how he learned Hebrew we do not know. Perhaps it was when he was with Luther at Wittenberg, or during his sojourn at Marburg; but his translation of the Pentateuch and the notes appended to the separate books show that he had a very competent command of it. Here, as in the case of his New Testament, it can be shown that he worked with the Latin of the Vulgate and the German of Luther open before him; but he used both with the entire independence of a man who knows that his own knowledge and judgment are sound. The work was provided with prologues to each of the books, in which Tindale discussed various matters of religious doctrine; in the prologue to *Leviticus*, for example, he attacks the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, an abuse of the scholastic theology which had quite obscured the literal meaning. He also added marginal notes, often with application to the times: for example, to Balaam's "How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed?" he appends the note, "The Pope can tell how." The text of this work is the basis of the Pentateuch as we read it to-day.

Soon after the publication we get another of the few personal glimpses of Tindale of which record has been preserved. Thomas Cromwell, already working to the front of affairs, had from shrewd political motives staked his fortunes on the success of the new doctrines; he recognized that so powerful a writer as Tindale would be a strong ally in breaking up the traditional attachment of England to the old Church. Accordingly, he took some steps in private toward calling Tindale back to England. It was a bold move, for the latter's works had been fiercely denounced by name in a royal proclamation.

The first difficulty was to find Tindale, for he was a hunted man. When at last Vaughan, the minister to the Low Countries, arranged an interview in the fields outside Antwerp, Tindale protested his loyalty to the king in moving terms. Vaughan reports him as saying:

"If for my pains therein taken, if for my poverty, if for mine exile out of my natural country, and bitter absence from my friends, if for my hunger, my thirst, and my cold, the great danger wherewith I am everywhere compassed, and finally if for innumerable other hard and sharp fightings which I endure, not yet feeling their asperity, by reason I hoped to do honor to God, true service to my prince, and pleasure to his commons; how is it that his Grace, this considering, may either by himself think, or by the persuasion of others be brought to think, that in this doing I should not show a pure mind and a true and incorrupt zeal and affection to his Grace?"

Even after the arrival of Tindale's *Practice of Prelates* in England, with its denunciation of the divorce, Cromwell had the hardihood to persist in his purpose in spite of Henry's anger. Vaughan arranged another meeting with Tindale, at which, under Cromwell's orders, he suggested that Tindale might still have the King's pardon if he were willing to retract his opinions on affairs of state. To this half-promise Vaughan reports him as answering:

"What gracious words are these! I assure you if it would stand with the King's most gracious pleasure to grant only a bare text of the Scripture to be put forth among his people, like as is put forth among the subjects of the Emperor in these parts, and of other Christian princes, be it the translation of what person soever shall please his Majesty, I shall make faithful promise never to write more, nor abide two days in these parts after the same; but immediately to repair into his realm, and there most humbly submit myself at the feet of his Royal Majesty, offering my body to suffer what pain or torture, yea, what death his Grace will, so that this be obtained. And till that time

I will abide the asperity of all chances, whatsoever shall come, and endure my life in as much pains as it is able to bear and suffer."

All of Vaughan's despatches show how deeply he was impressed by Tindale's high purpose and purity of character.

In the absence of a free translation of the Scriptures, however, Tindale wisely declined to trust himself in the hands of the English clergy.

In these last years of his life he resided in the English House at Antwerp with the English merchants. Foxe has given a brief account of his life here, not improbably derived from Tindale's host, Thomas Poyntz, who later made desperate efforts to save him from the Flemish courts:

"He was a man very frugal and spare of body; a great student, an earnest laborer in the setting forth of the Scriptures of God. He reserved or hallowed to himself two days in the week, which he named his pastime, Monday and Saturday. On Monday he visited all such poor men and women as were fled out of England, by reason of persecution, into Antwerp; and these, once understanding their good exercises and qualities, he did very liberally comfort and relieve; and in like manner provided for the sick and diseased persons. On the Saturday he walked round the town seeking every corner and hole where he suspected any poor person to dwell; and where he found any to be well occupied and yet overburdened with children, or else were aged and weak, these he plentifully relieved. And thus he spent his two days of pastime as he called them. He was a man without any spot or blemish of rancor or malice, full of mercy and compassion, so that no man living was able to reprove him of any sin or crime."

In this retreat at Antwerp Tindale worked on at his translation. In 1534 he issued a careful and thorough revision of his New Testament, with many improvements in accuracy or felicity of rendering. This is the basis of all subsequent editions of the New Testament in English. He also went on with his work on the Old Testament, and finished the historical books through *II Chronicles*. This part of his work, however, first saw the light in the edition of the Bible known as "Matthew's," which was edited by John Rogers, later the first martyr of Queen Mary's reign.

The end of Tindale's labors for our race came in 1535, when he was decoyed out of the protection of the English House and of the free city of Antwerp by an emissary of the reactionary party in England, and delivered over to the Flemish authorities on a charge of heresy. Once in their hands there could be only one outcome; for the Low Countries belonged to the Emperor, and were therefore Catholic.

The trial was leisurely and dignified, as if nothing more important than metaphysical doctrines of theology were at stake; and Tindale had full chance to defend his belief, though his defense only made condemnation surer. Cromwell made some efforts to save him, and Thomas Poyntz did all that man could do. But the times were most unfavorable for their efforts. In August, 1536, Tindale was found guilty, and soon after he was strangled and his body burned at the stake. Foxe reports that his last words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

Tindale seems always to have left in men's hearts a feeling of warm personal regard. From the testimony of Humphrey Monmouth, who befriended him in London, to that of the Procurator-General of Flanders, who conducted his prosecution, and who declared that he was *homo doctus, pius, et bonus*—"a learned, good and godly man," as Foxe translates it—all that we know of him speaks of him as a man of singular purity and high-mindedness. From the beginning he was impregnated with the enlightened and spiritual common sense of Colet's teaching; and he never lost sight of the fact that the religious life is a life of pure and simple living, of kindness and unselfishness and practical works of charity.

His indignation with the abuses of the old Church carried him to a bitterness of speech that in these days would be harsh and unfitting; but so gentle and humorous a man as Sir Thomas More far outdid him in unseemliness of abuse. We must remember, too, that Tindale had been driven into exile for no reason but that he wished to give the Scriptures to his countrymen in their own language, that the bishops were burning English New Testaments as fast as they could buy them up, that Wolsey stood at the head of the English Church, and that gross lives of many monks and friars and of some higher churchmen were a byword in the mouths of the people. It was a time when stinging words were needed. Erasmus played around the old abuses with his lambent wit, and then cried for peace when there was no peace. Tindale, like Luther, struck home at them with a grim and penetrating directness that meant war to the death between him and those whom he held to obstruct the pathway to salvation.

To Tindale's scholarship there is ample testimony outside of the well-recognized fact that his translation fur-

nishes the basis and substance of the Bible as we read it to-day. Sir Thomas More admitted that "before he fell into these frenzies he was taken for full prettily learned"; and Hermann Buschius, a friend of Erasmus and Reuchlin, and one of the chief scholars and critics of the time, wrote that the Englishman who translated the New Testament into English was "so skilled in seven languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, French—that whichever he spoke you would suppose it his native tongue."

He needed something more than scholarship, however, to create the style of the English Bible, for he was translating into a language on which for two generations to come scholars were to look down as rude and uncouth. For a final equipment he had the magical gift, through which he was able to clothe the literal meanings of the plain English words he used with the warm and elevated feeling which gives them life. He was helped by his purpose to give the gospel to the unlettered people as well as to the educated, for thus he was forced to use words which have all the richness of association with the things among which we live and move and have our being. Such words, too, are the best representatives of the Hebrew and Greek originals, for all the books of the Bible were written in the beginning for the unlettered, and are marked by a singular concreteness of phrasing.

With this necessity for using the living words of his tongue, and the genius to turn them to noble use, Tindale had the gift of so putting his words together as to suffuse them with the warm feeling which comes from rhythm and the harmonious succession of sounds. His controversial passages have many eloquent passages, and are constantly marked by a terse and grim irony that strikes home like a heated iron; and there is a letter of his to John Frith which is hardly surpassed in the language for tender and elevated beauty. His translation necessarily suffers in our ears as we read it through the small differences from the phrasing with which we are familiar; yet even so, one feels in this first translation all the strong movement, the stateliness and elevation, and the earnest ring of feeling which puts the Bible at the head of all that has been written in English.

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